

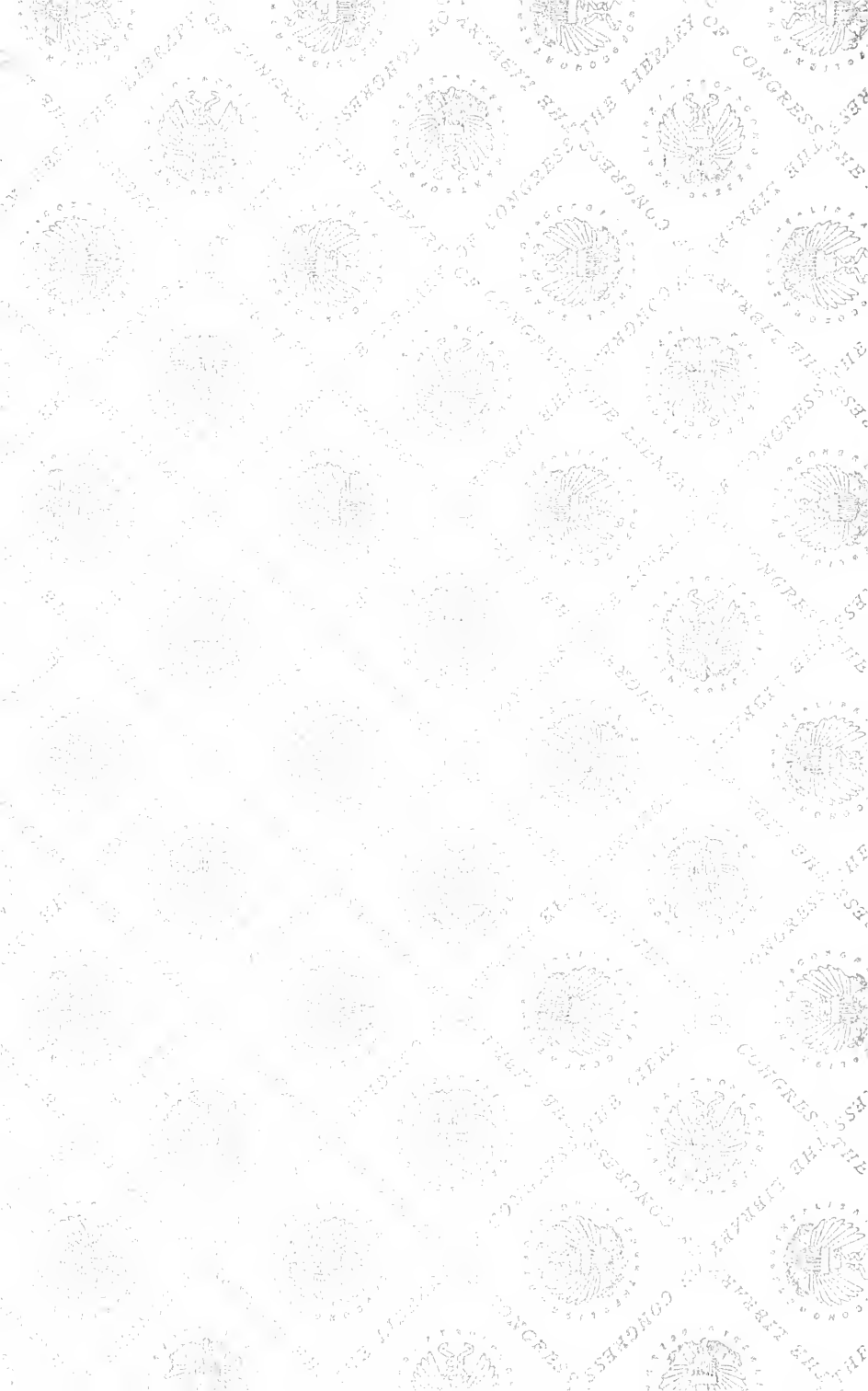
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John Adams as a Schoolmaster

By ELIZABETH PORTER GOULD

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JOHN ADAMS AS A SCHOOLMASTER.

BY ELIZABETH PORTER GOULD.

IN the summer of 1755, John Adams, when not quite twenty years of age, became the teacher of the grammar school in Worcester, Mass., then a town of 1,500 inhabitants.

According to an ordinance of the General Court, in 1647, that a town of fifty householders should have a school, Worcester, four years after its incorporation in 1722, had hired its first schoolmaster. Five years later, "whereas, many small children cannot attend y^e Schoole in y^e Centre of y^e Town by Reason of y^e remoteness of their Dwellings, and to y^e intent that all children may have y^e benefite of Education," the town voted a suitable number of "Schoole Dames" or "Gentlewomen," to be placed in y^e Several parts of y^e Town as y^e Selectmen may think most convenient." Upon the town's increase to one hundred families or householders, a grammar school, according to law, became a necessity. Rev. Thaddeus Maccarty, the clergyman of the town, being empowered by the selectmen to provide a schoolmaster, went to Harvard College to obtain one. At the Commencement exercises of the class of that year, 1755, he was especially impressed with one of the graduates, John Adams. The good scholarship, bold thought, strong language, and evident sincerity of the young man seemed to him good recommendation for the teaching career. He learned his standing in social life by the fact that he was number fourteen in a class of twenty-four; for pupils were then placed in

the order of the supposed rank or dignity of parents. The alphabetical order in their names and places was not in use until nearly twenty years later.

Before the return home of the minister, John Adams was engaged to teach the school. Three weeks later, a horse and an attendant were sent from Worcester to the Adams farm in Braintree, to accompany the schoolmaster to his new home. The journey of about sixty miles was made in one day.

Arriving in Worcester, he went to board at the town's expense, at Major Nathaniel Greene's, one of the three to carry into effect the vote of the town to maintain a grammar school. Immediately after the young schoolmaster was settled in his work, he began to write a promised account of the "situation of his mind." But the "natural strength of his faculties being insufficient for the task," he felt obliged to invoke the "muse or goddess who inspired Milton's pen," to help him "sing things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme."

The result of this in a letter dated Sept. 2, 1755, is as interesting today as when it was written; for it reveals a poetic tendency of the man which later circumstances did not tend to develop.

"When the nimble hours have tackled Apollo's coursers, and the gay deity mounts the eastern sky, the gloomy pedagogue arises, frowning and lowering like a black cloud begrimmed with uncommon wrath, to blast a devoted land. When the destined time arrives he enters upon action, and as a haughty monarch ascends his throne, the pedagogue mounts his awful *great chair*, and dispenses right and justice through his whole empire. His obsequious subjects execute the imperial mandates with cheerfulness, and think it their high happiness to be employed in the service of the emperor. Sometimes paper, sometimes his penknife, now birch, now arithmetic, now a ferule, then A, B, C, then scolding, then flattering, then thwacking, calls for the pedagogue's attention. At length, his spirits all exhausted, down comes pedagogue from his throne, and walks out in awful solemnity, through a cringing multitude. In the afternoon he passes through the same dreadful scenes, smokes his pipe, and goes to bed. Exit muse."

Considerable uneasiness was manifest in the beginning of this school experience. John Adams craved a larger sphere. The large number of "little runtlings, just capable of lisping A, B, C, and troubling the master," made the school to him a "school of

affliction." In spite of Doctor Savil telling him for his comfort, that by "cultivating and pruning these tender plants in the garden of Worcester," he would make some of them "plants of renown and cedars of Lebanon," he was certain that keeping it any length of time would make a "base weed and ignoble shrub" of him. Worcester at that time was not what it was even before the century closed. Twenty-eight years were to elapse before the running of the first regular stage from Boston to Worcester, eleven years before even the stage should pass through Worcester from Boston to New York. Sixty years were to pass before the first passenger train should run over the Boston & Worcester railroad. There was comparatively little knowledge of the outside world, since it was twenty years before the *Massachusetts Spy* — the first publication in Worcester — was published, and seventy, before a daily paper was issued there. In this lonely life among strangers, the new school teacher turned to the friends who had cheered his college days, particularly to Charles Cushing and Richard Cranch. Absence from them pained his heart while his philosophical mind cried, "But thus it is, and I must submit." At one time he longed for a letter from Richard Cranch to "balance the inquietude of school-keeping." He requested him to tell his friend Quincy that a letter from him written with that "elegance of style and delicacy of humor which characterized all his performances, would help make him a happy being once more." All correspondence was effected with difficulties, since it was twenty years before the establishment of a post-office in Worcester.

But, after all, this new life, instead of suppressing, stimulated his native energies. This is seen in the prophetic thought of a letter, written after he had been in Worcester about six weeks, to his friend and kinsman, Nathan Webb, beginning thus: "All that part of creation which lies within our observation is liable to change. Even mighty states and kingdoms are not exempted." It is evident he was moved by the existing state of affairs. This was the year of the expulsion of the French from Nova Scotia, Braddock's defeat, and the abortive expedition under Sir William Johnson against Crown Point. Regimental headquarters were at Worcester, causing tents to whiten the surrounding country. "Be not surprised," he wrote, "that I am turned politician. This whole town is immersed in politics. The interests of nations, and all the *dira* of war, make the subject of every conversation. I sit

and hear, and after having been led through a maze of sage observations, I sometimes retire, and by laying things together, form some reflections pleasing to myself." In this letter he showed a clear perception of the nature of friendship, which he calls "one of the distinguishing glories of man," when he declared, "In this, perhaps, we bear a nearer resemblance to unembodied intelligence than in anything else." His capacity for friendship was somewhat satisfied in the Worcester people whom he soon found to be "sociable, generous, and hospitable." He often dined, drank tea, or spent an evening with Major Chandler, Major Gardiner, Mr. Welman, and others. One evening he was discussing with Major Greene about the "Divinity and satisfaction of Jesus Christ"; another, he was wondering with Major Gardiner whether it was not the design of Christianity to make "good men, good magistrates, good subjects, good children, good masters, and good servants" rather than "good riddle-mongers, or good mystery-mongers." Another time he was making observations with his friends concerning the "prodigious genius cultivated with prodigious industry" of Mr. Franklin, who was coming back from Europe with a reputation enlarged on account of electrical experiments. He often supped and talked over matters with his first Worcester friend, Rev. Mr. Maccarty, whose church — the only one in town — he attended. It was not until after the death of Mr. Maccarty, in 1784, that another church — the Unitarian — was founded. Although Mr. Maccarty's successful ministry of thirty-seven years in Worcester was effective and appreciated by the people, yet human nature was such that while he was there, a warrant for a town meeting announced, "For y^e Town to Come into Some method that People may Sit in y^e Seats (in the meeting-house) assigned to prevent Disorders, and that they don't put themselves too forward." Some of the schoolmaster's observations at these friendly gatherings must have been scattered among the people, for in a letter written to his friend Cushing in April, 1756, he said, "There is a story about town that I am an Arminian." This, however, did not trouble him, for he then, as later, believed in a free discussion of all subjects. Meanwhile he succeeded in his school-work, and became by spring-time quite "contented in the place of a schoolmaster." In the diary, which he began while in Worcester (Nov. 18, 1755), he gives such a pleasant picture of his school at this time that I reproduce it here. He invokes no muse,

however, but trusts to the natural strength of his faculties, which, it will be remembered, he dared not do before. "I sometimes in my sprightly moments consider myself, in my great chair at school, as some dictator at the head of a commonwealth. In this little state I can discover all the great geniuses, all the surprising actions and revolutions of the great world in miniature. I have several renowned generals but three feet high, and several deep, projecting politicians in petticoats. I have others catching and dissecting flies, accumulating remarkable pebbles, cockle shells, etc., with as ardent curiosity as any virtuoso in the Royal Society. Some rattle and thunder out A, B, C, with as much fire and impetuosity as Alexander fought, and very often sit down and cry as heartily upon being outspelt, as Cæsar did, when at Alexander's sepulchre, he recollected that the Macedonian hero had conquered the world before his age. At one table sits Mr. Insipid, foppling and fluttering, spinning his whirligig or playing with his fingers as gaily and wittily as any Frenchified coxcomb brandishes his cane or rattles his snuff-box. At another sits the polemical divine, plodding and wrangling in his mind about 'Adam's fall in which we sinned all,' as his Primer has it. In short, my little school, like the great world, is made up of prigs, politicians, divines, L. D.'s, fops, buffoons, fiddlers, sycophants, fools, coxcombs, chimney-sweepers, and every other character drawn in history or seen in the world." He revealed the secret of his success as a teacher when he asked if it is not the "highest pleasure to preside in this little world, to bestow the proper applause upon virtuous and generous actions, to blame and punish every vicious and contracted trick, to wear out of the tender mind every thing that is mean or little, and fire the new-born soul with a noble ardor and emulation. The world affords no greater pleasure." He found by repeated experiment and observation in his school, that human nature was more easily wrought upon and governed by "promises, encouragement and praise, than by punishment, threatening and blame." He was, however, cautious and sparing of praise, "lest it become too familiar and cheap and so contemptible." He observed that "corporal as well as disgraceful punishments" depressed the spirits, while "commendation enlivened and stimulated them to a noble ardor and emulation."

Outside of school hours, when not with his friends, he was absorbed in reading and study. When he first went to Worcester

his mind was inclined to the ministerial profession. To this end he copied large extracts from the works of Tillotson and others. One morning he rose at half-past four and wrote "Bolinbroke's Letter" on retirement and duty; another time he wrote his "Reflections on Exile." A volume still remains in a very minute hand filled with passages from the works of various authors. He was greatly impressed with Milton, and charmed with Addison. His mind dwelt much upon "religious themes and miracles." His aspiration of soul indicates an unusual moral attainment for so young a man. "Oh," he cries, in a moment of self-examination, "that I could wear out of my mind every mean and base affection; conquer my natural pride and self-conceit; expect no more deference from my fellows than I deserve; acquire that meekness and humility which are the sure mark and character of a great and generous soul; subdue every unworthy passion, and treat all men as I wish to be treated by all. How happy should I then be in the favor and good will of all honest men and the sure prospect of a happy immortality!" He possessed what he esteemed the essential marks of a good mind, "honesty, sincerity and openness." While at Major Greene's, he came across "Morgan's Moral Philosopher," which he found was being circulated with some freedom in the town.

After being at Major Greene's three months, he went to board at Dr. Nahum Willard's, whose reputation and skill as a physician impressed him much. In his library he found Doctor Cheyne's works, Sydenham and others, and Van Swieten's Commentaries on Boerhaave. His general reading while there, suggested the thought of being a physician and surgeon. But on attending the courts of justice and hearing Worthington, Hawley, Trowbridge, Putnam, and others, he was drawn more strongly to the study of law. This desire grew more and more upon him, especially as he could not conquer his serious objections to the profession of the ministry. He finally went to talk the matter over with Mr. Putnam, an able lawyer with good practice. The result was a contract to study law with him for two years. He agreed to the proposal to board with Mr. and Mrs. Putnam at the rate the town allowed for his lodgings. He also agreed to pay Mr. Putnam one hundred dollars when he should find it convenient. This plan involved keeping the school two years longer to pay expenses; for he had taken up teaching in the first place, not so much from

choice, as from a desire to lighten the pecuniary burden his education had laid upon his father. "It will be hard work," he wrote his friend Cranch, within a week after the contract, "but the more difficult and dangerous the enterprise a brighter crown of laurel is bestowed on the conqueror." His decision to take up the legal profession was not approved by either of his friends Cranch or Cushing. The former even advised him to reconsider his resolution and take up the ministry. His father's general expectation was for him to be a divine. His mother, although a religious woman, had no special desire for him in that direction. His uncles and relatives were bitterly prejudiced against the law, as was public sentiment at that time. But John Adams had made up his mind. He went at once to work in Mr. Putnam's office with the firm resolution "never to commit any meanness or injustice in the practise of law," and to endeavor to "oblige and please everybody, but Mr. and Mrs. Putnam in particular." In his diary for Aug. 22, 1756, he said of this important move in his life, "Necessity drove me to this determination, but my inclination, I think, was to preach. However, that would not do. The study and practise of law, I am sure, does not dissolve the obligations of morality or of religion. And although the reason of my quitting divinity was my opinion concerning some disputed points, I hope I shall not give reason of offence to any in that profession by imprudent warmth." A month before writing this he had begun his second year in school. In order that he might not lose any time, and do more than the year before, he had resolved then to rise with the sun and to study the Scriptures on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday mornings, and to study some Latin author the other three mornings. Noons and nights he intended to read English authors. This resolution was crowned with a determination to "stand collected" within himself, and to "think upon what he read and saw." The very day after he wrote this resolution in his diary it so happened that it was seven o'clock when he arose, instead of sunrise. This for a July morning seemed to him inexcusable. But he grimly said, "This is the usual fate of my resolutions."

During the succeeding two years, in which six hours a day were devoted to school-work, John Adams made good use of Mr. Putnam's library, particularly the "handsome addition of law books" and the works of Lord Bacon, which Mr. Putnam had sent to

England for immediately after receiving into his office the new student. Upon his adding later Bolinbroke's works, as a result of reading the "Study and Use of History" and his "Patriot King," loaned him by the schoolmaster, an opportunity was given to read the posthumous works of that writer in five volumes. Mr. Burke once asked, who ever read Bolinbroke through? John Adams read him through then, and at least twice after that. But he confessed he did it without much good or harm. He considered his ideas of the English Constitution correct, and his political writings worth something, "although there was more of faction than of truth." He thought his style original, "resembling more the oratory of the ancients than any writings or speeches he ever read in English." But his religion was a "pompous folly, his abuse of the Christian religion as superficial as it was impious."

Among the multitudes of law books John Adams read, while teaching school in Worcester, were Wood, Coke, two volumes Lillie's Abridgement, two volumes Salkeld's Reports, Swinburne, Hawkins's Pleas of the Crown, Fortescue, Fitzgibbon, ten volumes in folio, besides octavos and lesser volumes, and many of all sizes that he consulted occasionally without special study.

But law was not always the subject of conversation. At breakfast, dinner, and tea, Mr. Putnam was commonly disputing with him upon some question of religion. Although he would agree to the extent of his learning and ingenuity to destroy or invalidate the evidences of a future state and the principles of natural and revealed religion, yet he could not convince himself that death was an endless sleep. This was the conclusion the keen-eyed student reached concerning the speculations.

Colonel Putnam and his pupil often conversed on other subjects as they walked around the farm, or went shooting together. In all his life in Worcester the young schoolmaster found time to commune with Nature. He took great pleasure in "viewing and examining the magnificent prospects of Nature" that lay before him in the town. One lovely May-day he "rambled about all day — gaping and gazing." He enjoyed the country drives to Brain-tree and back which his vacation visits afforded.

The sessions of the Superior Court at Worcester brought to Colonel Putnam's office interesting men whom John Adams delighted to meet. Here began the friendship with Jonathan Sewall, which was only shadowed by the different sides they took

in the Revolution of Independence. Years after, in spite of the broken friendship, Jonathan Sewall said of his friend, "He has a heart formed for friendship, and susceptible of its finest feelings. He is humane, generous, and open."

When John Adams' studies with Mr. Putnam were over, in 1758, he was sworn as an attorney in the Superior Court in Boston, at the recommendation of the eminent lawyer and scholar, Jeremy Gridley, then the attorney-general of the Province. The Worcester people having recognized the natural ability and scholarship of their successful school teacher for three years, invited him to settle in their town. But desiring a change for his health, he accepted his father and mother's invitation to live with them at the old home in Braintree. Here he was living at the time of his marriage in 1764. But he did not forget his Worcester friends. In less than a year he was spending a week in Worcester, dining and drinking tea as of old with Colonel Chandler, Doctor Willard, Major Gardiner, Colonel Putnam, and others. He occasionally attended Superior Court there, when he would visit the office where he "formerly trimmed the midnight lamp."

Thirteen years after he had lived there, while spending a day with Mr. Putnam, he found the "pleasure of revisiting old haunts very great." He saw little alteration in Doctor Willard or his wife. His sons were grown up. He met Colonel Chandler and other old friends. He went to church and saw "many faces altered, and many new faces." He was especially pleased to meet many young gentlemen who had been Latin pupils in his school. "John Chandler, Esq. of Petersham, Rufus Chandler the lawyer, Dr. William Paine, who studied physic with Doctor Holyoke of Salem, Nat. Chandler, who was studying law with Mr. Putnam, and Doctor Thaddeus Maccarty, a physician at Dudley." Would that this diary had also preserved some of the interesting reminiscences of teacher and pupils which that day must have heard! How could the interest of the now famous lawyer but center in the one who was studying law with Mr. Putnam in the office where he had spent so many profitable and happy hours.

In 1795, forty years after he had entered Worcester as its unknown schoolmaster, he visited the town as Vice President of the United States. Though now crowned with honor and fame, the heart of the teacher seeking old faces and old scenes, must, for the moment at least, have been master.

John Adams' three years of school-teaching left a lasting impression on his mind and character. When he was an old man in the retirement of his Quincy home, looking back over a life honored even with the presidency of the nation, he said that while he kept school he acquired more knowledge of human nature, than while he was "at the bar, in the world of politics, or at the courts of Europe." He went so far as to advise "every young man to keep school," for it was the "best method of acquiring patience, self-command, and a knowledge of character."

But the practical power of school work on John Adams was his gift to his native town of one hundred and sixty acres of land for the purpose of establishing there an academy. Many years, it is true, elapsed before a "stone school-house" could be built from the profits of the land. But it was at last erected on the site designated by the founder, over the cellar of the house in which Governor John Hancock was born. The following suggestion to the future masters of the academy was doubtless the result of his own experience as a teacher, when the methods of education were not as practicable as now.

"But I hope the future masters will not think me too presumptuous if I advise them to begin their lessons in Greek and Hebrew by compelling their pupils to take their pens and write, over and over again, copies of the Greek and Hebrew alphabets, in all their variety of characters. This will be as good an exercise in chirography as any they can use, and will stamp those characters and alphabets upon their tender minds and vigorous memories so deeply that the impression will never wear out."

It will always be a pleasant thought that this school in Quincy, now under the care of Dr. William Everett, is a legitimate outcome of John Adams' successful three years' life as the grammar school master in Worcester.

Though dead, he yet speaketh.

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